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Constituting Cultures of Compassion in Early Childhood Educational Settings

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Abstract

Applying ideas from Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), I investigate the emotional worlds of early childhood education, focusing on acts of compassion and their constitutive practices in Finnish settings. I conceptualize and analyze compassion as a collective activity, comprising acts of helping, including, comforting, and sharing, in the everyday life of a kindergarten. These acts of compassion are dynamic, negotiated, constituted, and produced in interaction. I focus especially on the formation of compassion related to rules that govern how it is and should be expressed in early childhood settings. I relate my analyses to the emotional worlds of families. Each family and kindergarten has its own emotional world, and its rules concerning how compassion should be expressed and when it is deserved. The discussion covers the methods used and the conditions under which compassion is supported.

Introduction

There is a long tradition of studies focusing on children's emotional development from various theoretical perspectives, as well as in different contexts. As Fler and Hammer (2013) state, the emphasis in most research on emotions in early childhood is on their individual construction, and generally in family contexts. On the other hand, recent studies on children and emotions tend to focus on the development of curricula and programs to teach young children socio-emotional skills, and self-regulation strategies for expressing their emotions (Madrid, Fernie & Kantor, 2015). These studies demonstrate the importance of understanding the role emotions play in children's learning, development and wellbeing. Despite these insights, however, less research attention has been given to how emotions are constructed, enacted, and negotiated in naturalistic social interactions in everyday life in homes and kindergartens, or to the rules and norms that regulate their expression. Studying emotions in naturalistic interaction is likely to yield new information on how they emerge and manifest

themselves in daily life, and how they are organized as aspects of a particular culture.

My aim in this paper is to investigate the emotional worlds (Madrid, Fernie & Kantor, 2015) of early childhood education in a Finnish setting, focusing on acts of compassion and their constitutive practices. I conceptualize and analyze compassion as a collective activity comprising the acts of helping, including, comforting, and sharing, in the everyday life of a kindergarten. These acts of compassion are dynamic, being negotiated, constituted, and produced in interaction. I focus especially on the formation of compassion related to rules that govern how it is, and should be expressed in early childhood settings.

Constituents of compassion

Most previous empirical studies on compassion have been conducted in experimental or healthcare settings. Experimental studies (for an extensive review see Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010) focusing on other than real, everyday interaction, conceptualize compassion as an individual skill or trait, and as an emotion one feels when others are in need or suffer and that motivates the desire to help and understand them. According to Goetz et al. (2010), compassion is a distinct emotion and should not be confused with distress, sadness or love, or with empathy, which is perhaps the closest in meaning. Whereas empathy means the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing, however, compassion goes further in leading to actions such as helping, including, caring/comforting, and sharing. Experimental studies (see Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010) have demonstrated that it is more difficult to feel compassion when there are differences between people in status, culture, religion, language, skin color, gender or age, for example. These studies have also revealed that deservingness is essential to the appraisal processes that give rise to compassion, and that feeling compassion is sensitive to the possible costs involved in helping someone else (see Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010).

Studies in healthcare settings have relevance to early childhood education given that caring is one of the leading forms of activity in both fields. Some researchers (Taggart, 2016) even argue that care foregrounds the ethical dimension of early childhood work, and that compassionate pedagogy is at the core in the ethics of care. Studies conducted in the healthcare sector (see Fotaki, 2015; Lown, 2015; Mannion, 2014; Shea, 2015) have shown that high-quality care and compassion are closely related. It has been demonstrated, for example, that being cared for by compassionate practitioners speeds up recovery (Gilbert, 2009), and that clinicians who feel that they are compassionately treated by their organization

and each other tend to be more creative and more open (Cole-King & Gilbert, 2011). However, most studies on compassion in the healthcare sector treat it as an individual attribute enabling health professionals to provide high-quality responsive care (Fotaki, 2015). As Fotaki (2015) points out, compassion should be understood as a social phenomenon that “shapes and is shaped by conditions of inequality and coercion extending to the notions of social justice and solidarity” (p. 200).

Research on children and compassion in early childhood settings is very rare, although there is a long tradition focusing on the development of pro-social behavior in childhood (see e.g., Eisenberg, 2013). Research within this tradition describes such behavior as a set of skills that an individual possesses, but does not deal with compassion per se, or with its interactional nature. We demonstrated in our earlier work (Paananen & Lipponen, 2015) that supporting compassion is not a top priority in the development of early childhood education or in the practices of kindergartens. On the contrary, these aims are systematically dislodged when they are conflicting, which happens especially when the decision-making is engulfed in the discourse of individualistic rights and a variety of governance measures narrows down the teacher’s decision-making scope (Paananen, 2015).

Family is a basic and, in most cases, the first emotional world of children. (Family is a complex concept, but I do not discuss the different conceptualizations in this paper). It offers children an environment in which to learn a whole range of emotions, as well as how they should be understood, expressed and enacted in different situations (Frost, 2014; Madrid, Fernie & Kantor). For example, children learn that if somebody hurts himself or herself they are expected somehow show to empathy, or even compassion, and to do something to comfort the sufferer, or to help the one in need. Furthermore, every kindergarten and every family is unique, each with its own emotional world. These emotional worlds of the two activity systems interact every day, in a variety of ways. Everyday encounters take place when parents pick up their children from a kindergarten or leave them there. Other encounters are dramatic, and unique in peoples’ lives. As Park, Leekeenan and Given (2015) demonstrate, a traumatic family event such as a conflagration may turn into a shared process of emotional learning, and into acts of compassion. Such acts of compassion come not only from the teacher but also from the whole community, the aim being to help the family to survive, and to recover. Collaboration between the kindergarten’s and the family’s emotional worlds is not always smooth. Bialostok (2015) describes his emotional journey, and his emotional work on the borderline between kindergarten and home when he was trying to find a kindergarten for his

son who suffered from Asperger's syndrome. People with Asperger's do not have a sophisticated understanding of the emotional worlds of other children or adults, and tend not to show empathy or compassion. Moreover, as Bialostok (2015) notes, the teachers also found it very difficult to understand the emotional worlds of this boy, and to express empathy with and compassion for him. Research has also shown that people feel more compassion for those who matter the most to their wellbeing, such as offspring and family members (Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010). However, as Nussbaum (2014) points out, this can lead to the division of the world between 'us' and 'them', and compassion for one's own children can so easily slip over into a desire to promote their wellbeing at the expense of that of other people's children. All in all, there is a lack of studies that treat compassion as a culturally and materially constructed phenomenon, especially in early childhood settings.

Cultural-historical activity theory as a framework for studying acts of compassion

There are various theories concerning the classification and conceptualization of rules (see e.g., Bernstein, 1996; Ferraris, 2013; Searle, 1969; Thornberg, 2009). With regard to school rules, for example, Thornberg (2009) found that they mediated the relation between subject and community in two main ways: they regulate pupils' everyday behavior, and socialize them into the moral life of school. Searle (1969) proposed a distinction between regulative and constitutive rules: the former regulate an activity (such as traffic), whereas constitutive create a possibility for rules an activity (such as playing a card game). I turn to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) in this paper to elaborate on the notion of rules as part of the constitution of compassion as a collective and interactional everyday practice of a kindergarten, and as mediators between subject and community.

The origin of CHAT is in Russian psychology aimed at bridging the traditional divide between individual and society (e.g., Leont'ev, 1981). The theory was further developed and formulated by Engeström (1987) in particular. The focus is on the complex, situated and distributed nature of ongoing activity in an activity system. Activity systems are systems in which people engage in solving problems or making or designing something (Greeno & Engeström, 2014). They are "dynamic, open, semiotic system(s) of meaningful actions and meaning-making processes" (Lemke 1990, p. 191). An activity system may be as small as an individual working with a computer, or as large as an organization with hundreds of employees. It is inherently historical, in other words it is under continuous change and transformation. As an analytical tool, CHAT allows the tracking of multiple relations between

institutions and individuals, the division of labor, artifacts, and rules that mediate the relations.

The basic elements of an activity system include the subject, the instruments, the division of labor, the community, rules, the object of the activity, and the outcome. The present kindergarten case serves to concretize the model, the activity system being the kindergarten. The subject is a teacher or another member of staff, whose agency is the chosen perspective in the analysis (it could be a child or a cleaner, for example). The selection of the subject depends on the perspective from which the activity is examined. Let us consider the work activity of a kindergarten teacher. The object of her/his work is the child and the child's learning and development, and the outcome is the child's wellbeing. The instruments the teacher applies include the curriculum, the children's individual ECE plans, and their learning portfolios. The community consists of the whole staff of the kindergarten: the principal, teachers, nurses, and other employees. The division of labor determines the tasks and decision-making powers of the staff members. The relation between the subject(s) and the community is mediated by rules, referring to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that, in varying degrees, liberate or constrain practices, interactions, and social relations within the activity system (Engeström, 1987). Rules dictate what it is to be a member of a particular community, such as a kindergarten: individuals cannot have rules of activity that are theirs alone. To some extent, rules are shared and collective. Some of them may be very explicitly expressed and enacted, but every activity system has implicit rules that are not put into words and are only reified in practices.

Study design: Constituting Cultures of Compassion

This study is a case analysis and a pilot study drawn from a broader research project, "*Constituting Cultures of Compassion in Early Childhood Education (CoCuCo)*", the objective of which is to investigate acts of compassion and their constitutive practices in early childhood settings. My focus in this article is on the following questions. What institutional rules and regulations contribute to the constitution of a culture of compassion? How is compassion enacted and expressed in the everyday life of a kindergarten, and in family interaction?

The study was conducted in the Children's House kindergarten (fictive name), located in the City of Helsinki. Children's House caters for about 60 children divided in three groups: two

groups of 1- to 4-year-olds, and one group of 4- to 6-year-olds. My research group and I worked with the group of 4- to 6-year-olds. The children represented the lower and middle classes of Finnish society in terms of socioeconomic background.

We gathered the data on site in October-November 2015. The data consisted of the Children's House curriculum, and observational notes. Every kindergarten in Finland is expected to design its own curriculum based on the National Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland (Stakes, 2005). Thus, the Children's House curriculum is an interpretation and implementation of these guidelines. The National Guidelines are not normative, meaning that it is not mandatory to follow them. Analysis of the curriculum sheds light on how the rules of compassion are formed and articulated as a part of the Children's House activity system.

The observation data were collected during five ethnographic visits to Children's House. Each visit lasted between two and four hours, and the total number of hours of observation was 16. During the visits the researcher took part in the everyday life of the kindergarten community, and observed the daily interactions, focusing especially on the acts of helping, including, comforting, and sharing. Whenever such acts were observed the researcher made notes about the situation, the people who were present, what was talked about and the tools that were used, and how the episodes began and ended. All these notes facilitated interpretation of the rules related to the constitution of compassion. Thus, my interest in this paper is not in how an individual child behaves or how compassionate she or he is, but in how acts of compassion are produced as part of the everyday life of a kindergarten.

Analysis

The aim in the analysis, which follows ethnographic logic (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon & Green, 2001), was to demonstrate the extent to which the constitution of compassion relates to rules that govern how it is, and should be expressed in early childhood settings. The data analysis proceeded in a series of cycles during which questions were posed and data was represented, in this case in the form of curriculum document and observations. An essential aspect of the analysis is the multi-phase process. First, I read the curriculum document carefully and marked all the occasions on which a rule concerning the constitution of compassion emerged. Second, I investigated the observation data. Keeping the research questions in mind I explored the data several times in an attempt to identify the regularities

and patterns (Mitchell, 1984; Roth, 2005). The final step was to translate the Finnish transcripts of the significant episodes into English.

Ethical Considerations

I asked for written authorization from the city of Helsinki, and the children's parents. All the parents allowed their children to participate in the study. Every attempt was made during every phase of the study to protect the children's anonymity and privacy, and to treat them, their parents and teachers with dignity.

Findings: Compassion as a part of everyday life in kindergarten

Below I report on the constitution of compassion as an interactional activity, and as part of everyday kindergarten life. I illustrate my theoretical discussion with illustrative vignettes from the data. In addition to substantiating my theoretical claims, the examples demonstrate the importance and relevance of the theoretical conceptualizations with respect to research on compassion.

Rules mediate the subjects' activities in an activity system such as a kindergarten. Rules regulate the subjects' practices, social relations, and interaction within the system either explicitly or implicitly (Engeström, 1987). Thus, in the present case, there is a connection between the rules the community uses to make sense of their social world in which compassion is experienced, and expressed. Rules inform the community about what is correct or expected behavior in particular situations, for example, and what is not. Whatever the staff members and children do on a daily basis at the kindergarten, their activities are mediated by rules, either implicitly or explicitly.

The activity system, the curriculum, and the rules of compassion

The analyses of the Children's House curriculum revealed seven rules that were explicitly related to acts of helping, including, caring/comforting, and sharing. These rules of compassion are not based on any law or formal regulations, but appear to have developed as part of the general working culture of this particular kindergarten. The following rules were identified (with the action they represent in parentheses):

- Interfere instantly in cases of bullying (including)

- Be a friend to all the children (including)
- Apologize, help and care (helping, caring)
- Encourage the children to say if they experience injustice (including)
- Acknowledge the reality from other peoples' perspective (helping, including, caring/comforting, and sharing)
- Help children to make new friends (helping, including)
- Comfort children who pine for their parents (caring/comforting)

These rules or conventions, needless to say, regulate and mediate how to behave in relation to other people in this particular activity system, and how to live with them (Engeström, 1987; Nusbaum; 2014; Thornberg, 2009). Most of the rules conveyed in the curriculum refer to acts of including. This could be interpreted as an attempt to make the kindergarten into an inclusive space in which dignity and safety are norms, diversity is recognized and accepted, and everyone feels encouraged, supported, and included. In a way, these rules represent policies for fairness in early childhood settings. The Children's House curriculum is a public document, and thus is easily accessible to families: one could assume that because these families bring their children to Children's House, they accept what is stated in the curriculum, at least to some extent.

Every activity system also has a set of rules that are specific to it, but also part of and stem from the broader cultural context in which the system exists. The rule, 'It is desirable be empathic when necessary', for example, could be considered universally accepted. Thus, some of the Children's House rules are formulated to maintain and mediate social and moral order in the kindergarten, and to promote empathy and compassion towards others. The consequences of breaking these rules are not spelled out, however. It is likely that any consequences are situation-specific, and are realized in everyday interactions. It is unlikely, for example, that bullying somebody and thereby breaking the rule "Interfering instantly in bullying" would not have consequences. How, then, are these rules stated in curriculum enacted and expressed in everyday interaction in the kindergarten and also with the family? I turn to this in the following section.

Observations of acts of compassion

Rules are seldom permanent, and in many cases are continuously questioned, contested, and reinterpreted by people in the everyday life of an activity system. Hence, the rules of compassion expressed in the curriculum are enacted and re-interpreted in everyday activities.

I identified 29 episodes in which acts of helping, including, comforting, and sharing were realized. A single observed episode could have involved more than one compassion-related act: in other words, I might have identified an act of helping and an act of comforting in the same one. Most of the compassion-related acts were acts of helping. However, the analysis also revealed that not all acts of helping (or including, comforting, and sharing) were acts of compassion. Namely, engaging in an act of compassion means that the one who is giving the help, for example, should recognize the other person's genuine need for it, which then motivates its giving. I analyzed the observation notes several times, and concluded that a good coding rule to distinguish helping from helping as an act of compassion, was a temporal delay in the carrying out of the act once the actor had observed the need. Given this criterion of temporal delay, from the recognition of a need to realizing an act, only 10 of the 29 acts could be considered acts of compassion, distributed unevenly: one act of helping, one act of including, and eight acts of caring/comforting.

The following vignette is an example of how compassion, and especially caring and comforting, are expressed in an everyday situation.

Vignette 1.

A child hits her head on a shelf, and starts to cry. A teacher recognizes this, goes to the child and clasps her in her arms. The teacher says some words of comfort to the crying child. Another child observes all this, and after a short time, goes to the crying child and starts gently to stroke her.

The crying child receives comfort from a teacher and from another child in this episode. Compassion is given in the combined form of touching, a rather intimate physical act, and verbally with words of comfort. The rule spelled out in the curriculum with regard to giving "help and care" in the expression of compassion is clearly followed. Interestingly, it was a child who offered compassion in this episode, which was not common in our data: the direction of most of the acts of compassion was from teachers to children. Perhaps, in this particular case, the teacher's example evoked the child's feeling of empathy, which then led to a concrete act of compassion.

The following vignette gives an example of cooperation between a mother and a teacher to find a mutually acceptable way of comforting and helping a child.

Vignette 2.

It is morning in the Children's House kindergarten, and a mother is dropping off her child. It appears that this morning, for some reason, the child is finding it difficult to let her mother go. She stays in her mother's lap, holding her very tightly. A teacher is also present, but only observes, and follows what is happening. After a few moments (a temporal delay) the teacher approaches the mother and the child, and asks the child very gently if she could hold her. The child looks at the teacher, but stays in her mother's arms. The mother turns to the teacher and tells her that the child would like to draw. Immediately the child gets off her mother's lap, goes to the teacher, and together they go and get the necessary materials for drawing. They go to the table and the child starts to draw. The teacher sits very close to the child, not saying anything, just watching what she is doing. The mother leaves.

In this episode the mother and the kindergarten teacher focus on a shared challenge, trying to find mutually acceptable ways of understanding and counteracting the child's apprehension. Despite not talking much to each other, they appear to address each other dialogically. The teacher does not interfere immediately, but allows the mother to comfort her child. It seems that both parties, the mother and the teacher, share and follow the same rule, that comforting is necessary when a child is reluctant to leave his or her parents. This episode demonstrates how acts of caring (holding in the lap), helping (getting the drawing materials), and caring (sitting close) are interweaved, and how words are complemented with concrete acts, and vice versa.

The following vignette exemplifies the complex, interactional, and multi-voicedness of compassion.

Vignette 3.

Two children (A & B) have just arrived at the kindergarten. The teacher welcomes them, and asks them what they would like to do. Child A, on her own initiative, goes into the arms of the teacher, who is sitting on the floor. A third child (C) is already in the teacher's arms. Child A turns to the teacher and says that she wants to go to home. Child B listens and joins the discussion, saying that she also wants to go home. The teacher reaches out, and Child B

comes and hugs her, and sits down next to her. The teacher gently asks what the matter is. Child A says in response that her mother and father always go to work. The teacher comforts her, saying that she understands that she is feeling gloomy, and simultaneously puts a hand on her own chest. The teacher goes on to say that the best medicine to combat gloom is play. The teacher and the children start to negotiate about what games to play or what activities to do. They decide to start a pirate game. All three children enthusiastically engage in playing

It is commonly believed that compassion is something that somebody gives and somebody else receives. As this vignette shows, it can also be requested. Child A, who was missing her parents, is a potential recipient. On her own initiative she approaches the teacher, sits on her lap, and only then verbally indicates a desire for compassion by saying that she misses her parents. Interestingly, emotion and desire for compassion appear to be transmitted from one child to another - in this episode from child A to child B. To alleviate the children's gloomy feelings the teacher directs their attention away from 'missing the parent' to a new activity, negotiating about what to play. This 'shifting away from suffering' appeared to be common practice in Children's House. According to the curriculum, caring and comforting is a rule, but how it is enacted in everyday situations varies: people not only carry out rules, they also reformulate and expand them, and produce new ones (Engeström, 1987). Albeit not inscribed in the curriculum, many episodes of caring and comforting also contained an element of physical comfort, such as touching.

Discussion

Despite the acknowledged importance of emotions in children's lives, little attention has been given to how they are constructed, enacted, and negotiated in naturalistic social interactions in everyday life at home and in the kindergarten. This paper contributes to enhancing understanding of children's emotional worlds (Madrid, Fernie & Kantor, 2015), focusing on the formation of compassion related to rules that govern how it is, and should be expressed in an early childhood setting. In elaborating on the notion of rules as constitutive of compassion, I applied ideas from cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987).

The analysis demonstrates that rules for compassion are clearly inscribed in the curriculum, and appear to be important elements in the existence of the emotional world of Children's House. Such rules mediate and regulate social life, and at the same time teach moral behavior to the whole community (Thornberg, 2009). They have significance, even if the teachers and

children do not explicitly refer to them, and do not thereby justify their situational acts. Registering the curriculum rules and making them accessible to many give them social significance, which is necessary for any activity system, and without which emotional worlds would not exist in the same way.

The most common rule, inscribed in the curriculum was ‘including’, which probably implies that the Children’s House kindergarten aims to be an inclusive space in which everybody is accepted, and everyone’s needs are recognized. In everyday interactions, however, most of the concrete acts of compassion were acts of comforting and caring. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the need for comfort and care is very visible in everyday life. The needs of a crying child missing its parents, or a child who has hurt itself are easy to recognize. Albeit not mentioned in the Children’s House curriculum, comforting was frequently accompanied and augmented with touching. Holding in the arms and taking onto the lap were so common as to appear almost the rule, formulated in everyday interaction as a situated practice, and based on an evaluation of whether or not the ‘suffering’ one deserved to be comforted and touched (see Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010). Every activity system has its explicitly expressed and enacted rules, but there are also implicit rules that are not put into words, but are only reified in practices.

Interestingly, most of the acts of compassion were directed by teachers towards children, and as previously mentioned, were mainly acts of comfort. My interpretation is that both adults and children follow the implicit rule that it is the ‘adult’s job to comfort children’. On the basis of this study, I suggest that children should be guided to express empathy more actively, and to evoke acts of compassion towards other children. The large number of acts of caring and comforting may well reflect the idea that early childhood education is still very much about caring. As Fotaki (2015) points out, studies done in the healthcare sector demonstrate that high quality is related to responsive care and compassion. Further, the number of genuine acts of compassion was smaller than expected. It could be that daily life in a kindergarten runs so smoothly that there is neither the need nor the opportunity to recognize, offer, and receive compassion.

Conclusions

Emotional worlds, and acts of compassion at home and in the kindergarten are not separate entities, and it is more than likely that they differ to some extent. Each family (and

kindergarten) has its own emotional world, and its rules on how compassion should be expressed and when it is deserved, for example (Frost, 2014). Almost every day, and especially when parents leave and pick up their children, the two activity systems, home and the kindergarten, negotiate on the boundary of two emotional worlds. The cooperation between the mother and the kindergarten teacher was smooth in my example (vignette 2), but it could have been otherwise. Tensions and disruptions are very common on the boundaries of two activity systems, in which the rules have a double function: simultaneously, they constrain and license what people are allowed and not allowed to do. Given their nature and institutional value, rules are powerful tools: they have control and influence over people and events, and have serious consequences for the construction of social reality in early childhood settings. Arriving at a deeper understanding of why teachers, children and parents act in the way they do in the context of Children's House requires an analysis of the history of this activity system. As Engeström (1987) points out, the challenges and potential of rules can only be understood against their own history, and as a local history of an activity system such as a specific kindergarten or a home.

Cultural-historical activity theory generally very seldom focuses on emotions, which nevertheless play an integral role in Leont'ev's (1978) work on activity. CHAT researchers should pursue activity-theoretical studies on emotions in further investigations, and focus especially on the dialectical role of motives and emotions in activity.

The identification of episodes of interaction in which acts of compassion and compassion-related rules are constituted is valuable not only for academic research on early childhood education: it also has pedagogical potential for the development of emotional worlds in kindergartens and families. Every teacher should be alerted to the possibility of harnessing compassion in their learning communities, and should be able to collaborate with families on this issue.

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